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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of writing response groups in changing the power relationships students maintain to empowering relationships in which students challenge authoritarian attitudes and generalizations. Subjects were three students in a freshman composition class at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Recorded conversations of these students discussing their research papers in writing response group sessions revealed that the shift from power trips to empowering conversation in writing groups depends upon the student writer's conceptions of his or her writing problems. To a large degree, these conceptions are shaped by two attitudes the student brings to the group: (1) notions about what writing is and what purposes writing can, or ought, to serve; and (2) willingness to engage in dialogue to discover purposes and to identify, describe, and resolve, if possible, discrepancies among various opinions. In terms of power, the student who resists the notion that writing is a dominating activity, who sees reading as a conversation rather than as passive acceptance or rote learning, who is willing to resist both the oppressor and oppressed roles, is better able to engage in empowering relationships. (KEH)

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Writing Response Groups: From Power Trips to Empowerment

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This paper was presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Seattle, Washington, Friday, March 17, 1989.

The theme of this conference--Empowering Students and Ourselves in an Interdependent World--prompts us to explore the concept of power, because maintaining traditional hierarchies and relationships of power are clearly *not* what we are up to when we talk about "empowering" students. Traditionally, power defines a world of oppressors and oppressed. In that world, power is often a weapon to be wielded. Frequently, power in this view is a limited commodity: some people have it; others do not. Thus, in various societies, those who have power have more beads, gold, women, slaves, or property than those they have power over. Being limited, this notion of power creates and even depends upon antagonistic, competitive relationships, as well as the compliance, ignorance, and passivity of those who do not possess or do not have access to the empowering items. These oppressor-oppressed relationships are, of course, maintained by various rhetorics.

I'm sure many in this room winced when they heard--or will wince when I tell them--of private consultants in California who teach teachers how to teach students to write "The Power Paragraph." Power, in this context, is a way of packaging information, but with what intent? I'm afraid that all too often the "Power Paragraph" and other strategies that use the word *power* to sell a product are the rhetorics of those "in power" intent upon retaining their power, which is also to say, rhetorics used to keep others weak, mystified, incoherent, even silent.

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Do we want to teach students those rhetorics?

Frequently, we come across those students who have learned those rhetorics and adopted their purposes too well: the students who write according to formulas, who refuse to use "I," who disguise human action and responsibility in bureaucratic prose, who attempt to define the nature of human existence in sweeping, "powerful" generalizations: "Since the beginning of mankind, people have...." These students often rely upon cliches and jargon to convey emotional impact, to assert and maintain power over their readers. It's as if to become a good writer, one must develop the ability to force one's fictions onto others, to make them play subordinate, rather than cooperative, roles in one's narratives and arguments.

All too often, though, when we shudder or express some sort of dissatisfaction with such prose, students merely ask to be told what styles, ideas, and formats we do like, and many seem willing to write in whatever ways we name in order to earn a good grade. Thus they avoid the responsibility of struggling with their own ideas, of making and expressing their own meanings.

Many of us, then, use writing response groups to counter the power relationships that these students try to establish and maintain. Response groups, we believe, challenge the supposed power of the writing teacher over students, the power they give us to dictate to them. When students meet without the teacher in small groups to discuss drafts of papers or plans for papers, we imagine we are giving them space to express their own opinions without looking to the teacher for approval. Nevertheless, as we all know from experience, the teacher's values--guidelines, expectations, preferences--certainly lurk around the edges. I know some writing groups in my classes have spent considerable time trying to decide "what Virginia wants."

But, even if the teacher keeps removing him or herself from an authoritarian position, we all know of writing groups that fail because, in the teacher's absence, some students assume power over others: consciously or unconsciously, some students intimidate others on the basis of presumed gender, racial, or educational superiority. When this happens, what was meant to be an empowering experience can become even more threatening and silencing than the relationships students may have with a less authoritarian teacher. While we may view response groups as opportunities to question, negotiate, try out ideas, and explore options, students don't necessarily resist the authority of other students.

At their best, however, writing response groups can provide spaces for students to challenge authoritarian attitudes and relationships--those that depend upon power over, on unquestioning acceptance of opinions and rules, on domination and submission. If the empowerment we prize is not to give students the power to dominate others, what is the nature of the power--or rather of the empowering relationships--that we seek? What, in other words, are the rhetorics of empowerment?

To answer that question I will now turn to a writing response group where--for most of its 25 minutes--I hear three students engaged in an empowering discussion. Which is to say that in their conversations about their research papers as they discover and work on different aspects of writing and discuss various issues about their topics, their interpretations of their reading and their sense of their responsibilities as writers become problematic and negotiable.

Perhaps most interesting about the group is that two of the three students choose not to focus on their written texts--though they have brought a couple of pages of writing to the group. They do not work on revising sentences and paragraphs because they have more urgent needs to

address: they need to deal with what Stephen Witte calls "pretextual concerns." In his article "Revising, Composing Theory, and Research Design," Witte suggests that we often ignore these pretextual concerns because our models of revision are based upon the existence of a written text. But, as Witte notes, writers frequently have to make important decisions that the texts themselves reflect, but which they do not express. These concerns include the need to select an appropriate frame or genre, a macrostructure that organizes ideas and content; the need to articulate purpose: what the writer wants readers to think, feel, believe, or understand as a result of reading this essay; and, most importantly, the need for the writer to locate him or herself in a world where competing texts and readers--including teachers and fellow students--seem to dictate what one ought to believe. In other words, the students in this writing group need to discover the spaces for their texts, a discovery that comes as they formulate ideas, discover purposes, and decide upon appropriate patterns for their discourses.

In the writing response group we are now going to look at, the first two writers, John and Leka, focus on articulating and revising some pretextual concerns, whereas Maria ought to, but does not. Thus, I would say that John and Leka are more empowered by their work in this group than is Maria.

John, Leka, and Maria were in Writing 1, a required composition and rhetoric course for freshmen at the University of California, Santa Cruz. As part of the course students met in groups of three to discuss and read drafts of their papers. I had given them some suggestions, but no hard and fast guidelines for discussing papers. I had used one class period to model and encourage what I mean by reading for understanding, rather than judgement, and had asked them to tape their meetings. Prior to this meetiing, they had met three times to discuss three short essays. Now they are working on a research paper that is an extension of one of the earlier

essays. To this meeting each brings some writing and several problems.

John's paper is the first to be discussed; he comes to the group with a page and a half of writing, but he's quite sure "*no one could understand it.*" He tells Leka and Maria:

> *My topic is abortion. And um and so I--I took the ideas from either side and then I then I went along and I and for each side I--I'm showing what what how it's um how it's extreme or how it's or what it says that may be good or what it says that may be bad--for each side, y'know. And then hopefully at the end I'm gonna I'm gonna tie it together and say something about what I feel about each side.*

Here John indicates that his understanding of what an essay is, his pre-text, includes a common frame or organizational pattern for the essay: give the pro side, then the con side, then "*tie it together and...say something about what I feel about each side.*" This is not an inappropriate pattern; it seems clear, even easy, but John finds it inadequate for what he wants to say. This frame is insufficient for his purposes, but he's not sure what other frame might serve. He had found another in a batch of research papers written by college students that I had loaned him, but he's not satisfied with that one either:

> *...these papers just go along and illustrate sides to a point and then the guy says what he thinks about it and one of the guys didn't even decide, he just goes "It's up to you," y'know. I don't know if that's good or not, y'know.*

Shortly after this comment, John proposes an alternative to the pro-con frame, raising the possibility of using a problem-solution frame: "*...at the end I want to say how how how neither extreme really answers the problem.*" Twice Maria asks him: "*Do you have a solution?*" But John sidesteps the question, mostly, it seems, because he hasn't clearly articulated *a* problem; actually he is dealing with more than one problem. Having rejected the extremes, he has to find his place somewhere in-between, and this is a territory that has no clear map. In this territory the "problem" called *abortion* could refer to a number of problems. For instance, should my

girlfriend have an abortion? Should federal monies be used to fund abortions? Should abortions be legal? Should I encourage or discourage others concerning abortion? And, because John is a Catholic and a graduate of a Catholic high school, do I agree with the official Catholic stand on abortion? So, though John has a fairly clear sense of purpose--he says, "*I'm trying to show...how neither extreme really answers the problem*"--he hasn't discovered the frame that will let him include all the problems abortion raises for him. Towards the end of the discussion of his paper, he will come back to this purpose after repeatedly rejecting Leka's and Maria's urging that he "take sides" or provide solutions.

About two-thirds of the way through the discussion of John's paper, Maria asks a most helpful, which is to say empowering, question: *"Did your opinion change after you did your research?"* This question is empowering because Maria identifies John as the author and suggests a narrative frame: first I thought this because of this, then I read that, and now I think this. By framing his essay as a narrative with himself-as-thinker as the main character, John will be able to contextualize the problems, and this contextualizing will allow him to fulfill the complex purposes of his paper: to show how he discovered that much of the public rhetoric about abortion is oversimplified, thus inadequate to address the problems abortion raises for him; to articulate his own point of view without forcing it onto his readers; and to demonstrate its reasonableness in light of the two extremes. John now knows from his research and reflections that he cannot eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty; there may be equally credible but differing opinions about how one ought to act in specific situations. And in his response to Maria, he proposes the outline for the story of his thinking:

> *Well before I was more leaning toward what they call pro-life which isn't necessarily what that word means, but um but but now the more I look at the the more difficult it is to come to a decision.*

John's language here and throughout the discussion of his paper exhibits thinking at the point of utterance; it is full of stumbling sentences, false starts, non-sequiturs. John is unraveling several kinds of pretexts that he has heard or read about and trying to put together his own. In addition to the pro-con, problem-solution frames, John is dismantling the Catholic text on abortion, as well as the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice positions. To do this, he must deconstruct both the Church's definition of the problem *and* the either-or frames that shape many of the public debates on abortion. And this is a risky business. Perhaps he could do it alone in his room, but my sense is that assisted by concerned fellow students who claim no superior knowledge, he is more willing to take those risks. Certainly he shows the courage to do so when he rejects suggestions that might make the paper "sound good," but that do not satisfy his own need to formulate his own opinions.

The discussion of John's paper concludes with this exchange:

Leka: *You don't need to come to a final decision; maybe you can just say that I'm still thinking about this.*
John: *Yeah either I have to do that--say um that I still haven't been able to come to a conclusion or I should just take a side no matter whether I agree with it or not and try to argue that*
Leka: *That might make it stronger too*
John: *that would make it stronger. Unhnm. But I hate doing that.*

John says this very quietly, and when I heard it on the tape, I wanted to stand up and cheer. It's really impressive how many "powers" John has resisted in order to take the responsibility for defining and articulating his own beliefs.

Leka, like John, comes to the group with some limited pre-texts. She had written a rather poor essay a couple of weeks earlier which she refers to:

> *What's really hard for me is like trying to incorporate this into this other paper because...my other paper was so bad, it just didn't make any sense at all. There was hardly anything I wanted to use from it.*

In fact, that essay was full of cliches and vague expressions about what art meant to her. She wanted to answer this question because she was often asked why she was majoring in Art by friends and relatives who found it an impractical, useless major. Leka correctly realizes that to edit or polish that original text would be pointless. To show her how artists write effectively about their calling, I had given her Ben Shahn's essay "What is Art?" from his book *The Shape of Content,* and she had decided to make Shahn's essay the focus of her essay.

In terms of frames, she knows how to give a report by quoting and paraphrasing Shahn, but she doesn't know how to integrate her own ideas and Shahn's. In the discussion that follows, Leka resists the power of merely reporting and discovers how to get into conversation with Shahn, how to get beyond a simple acceptance of Shahn's ideas as "the truth," how to use Shahn to expand her understanding of art and artists, and also how to question him. By talking about him with John and Maria, others who know and respect her but really don't give a damn about Shahn himself, she gains some distance on Shahn and can treat him as a partner in dialogue, not an authority that tells her what to think.

Again it is Maria who gives the helpful response. After Leka has read a series of quotations from Shahn's essay, quotations loosely connected with phrases like "Shahn believes," "He wonders," Maria asks: "*How come you used him?*" This question identifies Leka as the one who controls and shapes the discourse. It's Leka's choices Maria is interested in, not Shahn's, and Maria prompts her to make sense of Shahn to suit her own purposes.

As Leka tries to answer Maria, the group makes some sophisticated observations about the problems they face as writers because of the problematic nature of reading. When John advises her to "*stick to what he's [Shahn's] basically saying,*" Leka responds: "*Yeah, it's hard to pick out...he says this and...I can interpret it one way, and then sorta fit it into what I want to say.*" Maria adds: "*Other people can then interpret it different.*" And referring to his own paper, John notes: "*I keep writing my interpretations [but] you could interpret this in about five other ways.*" These insights show that they are moving beyond a sense of the writer as one who knows everything, who delivers truth to ignorant readers whose job it is to record and accept it. By acknowledging that reading itself is a constructive, open-ended activity, they see new problems and responsibilities they have as authors. If they can interpret the texts they read in several different ways, so too others can interpret their texts in unforeseen ways.

What Leka achieves, Maria does not. She wants to find out the effects of fasting in order to decide whether or not it is a good way to lose weight. A couple of friends have been fasting, and she is quite sure it is a bad thing to do. After reading the first paragraph of her draft, she identifies a rather limited concern, a concern that pre-empts discussion of her opinion. She asks John and Leka: "*D'ya think that's a good thesis?*" This is obviously a premature question to ask her readers. John and Leka can't evaluate her thesis until they hear the rest of the essay. Appropriately, Leka avoids answering her question and asks: "*How are you going to try to find this?*" Maria's response again reveals that she is more concerned with form than argument: "*Well, I break it into three.*" This response suggests that her pre-text is the traditional five paragraph essay.

In the ensuing discussion, Maria will not let go of this frame, nor will she get beyond either-or thinking. For her fasting must be either all good or all bad, and she expects the facts to

speak unambiguously for themselves. She admits that one of the books she has read was a "*how-to book written by a doctor*" that recommended certain kinds of fasting to control weight, but she dismisses it with a laugh. Though Maria does demonstrate that she has learned a lot about the subtle physiological effects of long and short term fasts, throughout the discussion she keeps the focus on formal matters.

When John and Leka try to get her to define fasting more precisely, she cuts the conversation short: "*OK, I'll make that clear in the beginning. So, do you think it's kind of organized?*" And she ends the discussion with: "*I don't know if my paper's gonna go up to eight pages; it should, cuz I'm talking about three things and stuff.*" As a matter of fact, she turned in six pages. Clearly, her pre-textual frame--the five-paragraph essay--and her either-or thinking limited the essay's development. In addition, she used a lot of the technical vocabulary from the physiology books she read, a vocabulary that would not communicate with the readers--her friends--she is trying to convince that they should not fast.

As a writer, Maria's composing is what I call "criteria-driven," drawing upon Peter Elbow's observation about criteria-driven readers:

> ...conscious criteria can...be a screen between readers and your words--a filter which keeps a reader from contacting and experiencing your words directly--leading them...just to compare your words to a model, hold them up against a template, check off categories on a list. (*Writing With Power 250)*

Similarly, writing to criteria sets up a filter for Maria that keeps her from fully exploring the problems and issues that have come up in her reading. Had Maria taken Leka's concerns into account--it comes out a couple of times in the discussion that Leka has done juice fasts--or the opinion of the doctor, had she incorporated the narratives of her friends into her paper, she would have developed more complex and subtle opinions. However, she does not alter her pre-

texts; instead she seems to see herself as responsible for meeting a limited number of technical requirements.

It's heartening to note that Maria did not apply formalist criteria when responding to John's and Leka's papers, perhaps because neither of them invited such consideration of their texts. And, as we have seen, she did give helpful responses to both of them. One would like to encourage the Marias in our classrooms to approach their own writing and printed texts, indeed anyone or thing that attempts to exert power over them, in the ways she responded to John and Leka.

While listening to this tape, I came to realize that the shift from power trips to empowering conversations in writing groups depends a great deal upon the student writer's conceptions of his or her writing problems. And these conceptions are--to a large degree--shaped by two attitudes the student brings to the group: (1) the student's notions about what writing is, particularly the purposes his or her writing can, or ought, to serve; and (2) the student's willingness to engage in dialogue to discover purposes and to identify, describe, and resolve, if possible, discrepancies among various opinions. In terms of power, the student who resists the notion--both as a writer and as a reader--that writing is a dominating activity, who sees reading as a conversation not passive acceptance or rote learning, who is willing to resist both the oppressor and oppressed roles, is better able to engage in what I am calling empowering relationships.

This writing response group and many others I have listened to indicate that the two most popular forms for groups--the criteria-based editing group and the silent writer/mirroring reader kind derived from Peter Elbow (*Writing Without Teachers*)--may prevent students from engaging in certain kinds of empowering conversations. This is because those formats exclude

exploratory discussions wherein students consider, reject, and reformulate pretexts, explore ideas and opinions, and develop interesting and complex rhetorical purposes. Most important, those two formats do little to encourage the dialogical attitudes that are the bases for empowerment in an interdependent world. There may be a place for them, but teachers should be wary lest they impose them upon students and their writing prematurely. We certainly don't want to have students become disempowered by their fellow students or by their own texts!

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